

VZCZCXRO8832  
RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHDBU #1267/01 2800257  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 060257Z OCT 08  
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1030  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0225  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0262  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0177

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 001267

SIPDIS  
SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - FOOD SECURITY TAKES CENTER STAGE

¶1. (U) This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Food security in Tajikistan likely will continue to decline, and the inability of many Tajiks to buy sufficient food likely will worsen in the coming winter. President Rahmon is calling for more food aid, and decrying the high price of food worldwide and its impact on highly food-insecure and import-dependent Tajikistan. The Government is not coordinating effectively with the donor community on strengthening food security, however, and the President continues to pursue policies that prevent increased food production in Tajikistan. End Summary.

¶3. (U) President Rahmon has begun to call attention to the looming food crisis in Tajikistan. In his remarks at the UN General Assembly he noted that food insecurity had "seriously affected" two thirds of families in Tajikistan. He predicted the upcoming winter in Tajikistan would be more difficult than the past severe winter. Rahmon blamed climate change (for reducing water supplies and agricultural output) and world food prices, for the inability of many rural Tajiks to buy sufficient food.

¶4. (SBU) USAID partners and the World Food Program report that food insecurity - the inability of Tajiks to afford to feed themselves properly - this coming winter will be worse than last winter. World Food Program surveys throughout Tajikistan found that 37 percent of urban Tajiks and 34 percent of rural Tajiks were food-insecure. About one-third of the rural food-insecure, and two-fifths of the urban food-insecure are in the category of severely food-insecure, unable to afford to feed themselves on a basic food basket of wheat, oil, and sugar.

¶5. (SBU) Three main factors contribute to the worsening food-security situation. First, despite pronouncement to the contrary, the Government in many regions discourages crop diversification away from cotton. Farmers forced to grow cotton are driven further into debt by the artificially low prices they are forced to accept for their cotton, in order that cotton investors continue to reap profits. With low incomes and no options to diversify, farmers must sell what assets they have to buy food, in a downward financial spiral of increasing debt and hunger. Second, Tajikistan is highly vulnerable to increasing world food prices and energy, because of its dependence on food imports. Food prices in Tajikistan have doubled since late 2007.

DROUGHT AND A HANGOVER FROM LAST WINTER

¶6. (SBU) Third, last winter was unusually cold, with significant power disruptions throughout the country, and was then followed by a severe drought. Precipitation levels in 2008 are less than half their historic average throughout the country. Crops were damaged by the weather, and overall food security declined. Food-insecure Tajiks are going into this coming winter in a weaker financial state, with more debt and fewer assets to sell to buy food.

Increasing unemployment has made lower-income Tajiks more dependent on remittances and assistance from family members in Russia or on the generosity of neighbors.

#### LACK OF COORDINATION

¶7. (SBU) The World Food Program (WFP) chairs a Food Security Working Group combining most international donors, with the Government of Tajikistan invited. Emboff met with WFP's food security specialist, Cedric Charpentier (protect). He said the Government of Tajikistan rarely sent a representative to the Food Security Group, which meets twice a month. WFP reported information on food security and donor activities to the Ministry of Trade and Economy (which is charged with coordinating GOTI efforts to mitigate winter food and energy shortages), but received no information in return that would allow it to judge whether donor activity was coordinated with Government relief efforts.

#### LACK OF TRUST

¶8. (SBU) Charpentier also questioned food security survey information from the Government. He noted that in the past, Government food production figures simply echoed the Government's own public production targets, and bore little relation to reality. USAID partner Mercy Corps' Director Brandy Westerman (protect) and WFP's Charpentier both commented that they could not get any sense of the extent of GOTI food and fuel relief efforts during the unusually harsh past winter, making them skeptical of Government claims to be prepared for the coming winter.

¶9. (SBU) For the Government view, Emboff met with Minister of Economy and Trade Bobozoda, on September 30. He said the GOTI was

DUSHANBE 00001267 002 OF 002

stockpiling wheat flour and fuel, and was ensuring that local governments around the country had stockpiled coal to heat hospitals and schools. He said the GOTI had successfully distributed generators and other relief supplies donated by foreign countries last winter. Bobozoda said he wanted to see better coordination between the Government and foreign donors and NGOs, and worried that certain NGOs focused too much on specific regions to the detriment of overall relief efforts.

¶10. (SBU) The Embassy, like WFP, is skeptical of Government claims on its preparations for the winter, because of lack of specifics, lack of observed results last winter, and deceptive information about related measures to help farmers. As noted in other reporting, official claims about freedom to farm consistently are contradicted at the local level, where coercion to farm cotton remains a firmly entrenched practice. When USAID representatives met with farmers in Shartuz district recently, the farmers complained that they were required to devote 75% of their land to cotton, could not find markets for food crops (they noted that food processing industries existed in the region during the Soviet Union, but they had fallen into disrepair and no longer functioned), and were worried about being able to afford food in the coming winter. A local government representative at the meeting dismissed their worries; the farmers in turn dismissed his assurances, noting that the local government was preventing cotton farmers from removing cotton stalks to plant winter wheat, in hopes of squeezing a little more out of this year's cotton crop.

#### COMMENT - BLAMING EVERYONE BUT HIMSELF

¶11. (SBU) Rahmon used his UNGA speech and various meetings with foreign officials to draw attention to Tajikistan's need for food assistance, and this effort is welcome in so far as it helps focus attention on the country's serious and worsening economic problems. But it does not represent a major departure from the GOTI's usual state of denial; Rahmon blamed the food security crisis on the weather and on world prices, with no acknowledgement of his own culpability in slowing land reform and perpetuating cotton monoculture to benefit a few friends - while a large part of the population literally goes hungry. The most imaginative thing Rahmon has done in response to increasing hunger has been to dispatch gifts

of food to 3,000 needy families, identified by local authorities.

¶12. (SBU) Increasing food insecurity has not reached the point where rural Tajiks are fleeing their homes in search of food, but it has gotten the attention of the President as an issue which could be used against him, and therefore a threat to his grip on power. Tajikistan will need significant international relief efforts this coming winter, and continued long term assistance to build its agricultural capacity and reform its agricultural and trade policies.